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ON PAGE E41

THE WASHINGTON POST
26 April 1980

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Somalia: Anatomy of a Soviet Blunder

In the apparently unending succession of U.S. foreign policy disasters and Soviet triumphs, it's a relief to be able to report a case where the Kremlin blew it — to the advantage of the United States.

The locale of this encouraging exception is Somalia, where U.S. forces will soon be occupying a key naval base that was built by the Russians before they were booted out two and a half years ago by a supposed Soviet puppet, President Mohammed Siad Barre.

Intelligence experts have warned President Carter that it's dangerous to put much faith in the mercurial Barre. But Carter's top advisers have convinced him that the Soviet-developed deepwater port at Berbera is worth the risk.

Barre "has shown himself to be unpredictable and impulsive at times," a confidential CIA analysis observes — an understatement to which the men in the Kremlin can ruefully attest. In fact, the Soviet blunder in Somalia is a classic lesson in how not to handle a Third World dictator.

The Russians poured more than \$160 million into Somalia after Barre seized power in 1969, the CIA estimates. The Soviets clearly hoped to make Somalia a key satellite in the strategically important Horn of Africa, from which they could dominate the Persian Gulf.

The Berbera naval base included a communications center, shipyard cranes and a floating drydock, missile storage facilities, an airfield and

housing and an outdoor theater for the hundreds of Soviet technicians and their families. Berbera greatly expanded the peacetime operations of the Russians' Indian Ocean fleet and enhanced its wartime capability against the West, the CIA noted.

In return for Kremlin gold, Barre allowed the Soviets free run of his country. A 1976 State Department cable stated that Barre "is now completely committed" to the Soviets. More than 2,500 Soviet advisers permeated the Somali government bureaucracy.

Teachers and civil servants were required to attend weekly indoctrination classes run by the Soviet-created Political Office of the Presidency, and any Somali official "judged to have a 'non-socialist' attitude [was] retired or dismissed from government service," the CIA reported.

A 1,000-man National Security Service organized a month after Barre seized power was run by 12 KGB officers and got its technical equipment and personnel training from Moscow.

Neighborhood "orientation centers" — doubling as food distribution centers to gain a captive audience — were operated by the Russians. "Applicants for government jobs, drivers' licenses, passports and other documents [were required] to present letters of recommendation from the directors of their local orientation centers," a secret CIA report stated.

Under the guidance of Soviet economic advisers, Barre nationalized

local and foreign businesses in Somalia.

The Russians virtually took over the Somali armed forces, with a contingent of civilian advisers and some 1,300 military officers. Somali officers were required to attend indoctrination classes on Marxist-Leninist ideology, and soon found that their careers were influenced more by the Soviets' evaluations than by their superiors'.

But the Soviets' heavy-handedness eventually proved too much for Barre. The last straw, apparently, was the Russians' attempt to play both ends against the middle by giving massive aid to the Ethiopians, who were engaged in a border dispute with Somalia.

Finally, in November 1977, Barre had had enough of the Russian bear hug, and unceremoniously kicked the Soviets out, lock, stock and barrel.

Intelligence experts told my associate Dale Van Atta they hope the United States can profit by the Russians' mistakes.